



How do you support
EVERY
Learner?

Differentiation in the Language Classroom

By SUSAN REESE

Picture a German II class in which the students are studying the weather in order to plan for their weekend activities. But rather than sitting all together and following the teacher's lead in completing a single assignment, the students are using various learning centers. This means some are listening to radio podcasts in German. Others are watching a video clip of a German TV weather report. Still other students are reading and analyzing German weather maps from an online newspaper. It is up to the students to choose the center that will best help them understand a German weather report in order to make plans for the weekend, while the teacher plays the role of the facilitator to assist their learning.

Why is this teacher doing things this way? Isn't having multiple activities a lot of extra work? Will it have a payoff for these students? Does it really work to "differentiate" learning in this way?

In her book, *The Differentiated Classroom: Responding to the Needs of All Learners*, Carol Ann Tomlinson says, "In differentiated classrooms, teachers begin where students are, not the front of a curriculum guide. They accept and build upon the premise that learners differ in important ways. Thus, they also accept and act on the premise that teachers must be ready to engage students in instruction through different learning modalities, by appealing to differing interests, and by using varied rates of instruction along with varied degrees of complexity."

Tomlinson is the William Clay Parrish Jr. Professor and Chair of Educational Leadership, Foundations, and Policy at the University of Virginia's Curry School of Education. She is also the co-director of the university's Institutes on Academic Diversity and an expert on differentiated instruction. "Differentiation is responsive teaching rather than one-size-fits-all teaching," Tomlinson explains. "To put it yet another way,

it means that teachers proactively plan varied approaches to what students need to learn, how they will learn it, and/or how they will show what they have learned in order to increase the likelihood that each student will learn as much as he or she can, as efficiently as possible."

According to Tomlinson, effective teachers link three areas of curriculum: content (what students will learn), process (the activities through which they will learn), and product (how they demonstrate and extend what they understand and can do). Among the strategies used in a differentiated classroom are:

- Stations (These are different spots in the classroom where students work on various tasks simultaneously.)
- Complex Instruction (This strategy establishes equity of learning opportunity in the context of intellectually challenging materials and through the use of small instructional groups.)
- Orbital Studies (These are independent investigations that revolve around some facet of the curriculum.)
- Centers (Learning or interest centers are most common and, unlike stations, work separately rather than in concert.)
- Tiered Activities (These keep the focus of the activity the same, but provide routes of access at varying degrees of difficulty, so that students with different learning needs work with the same essential ideas and use the same key skills.)

The Differentiated Language Classroom

In her book, Tomlinson describes a differentiated French I classroom with students often working with written tasks at differing levels of complexity and with different amounts of



teacher support. Oral communication tasks focus on the same basic topics, but completion requires different levels of sophistication, and sometimes students can “opt out” of review sessions to create their own products or presentation or to read a French language magazine. Students often work in teacher-assigned, mixed-readiness pairs to prepare for checks on fundamentals and may, from time to time, select a partner to prepare for a challenge demonstration.

Toni Theisen, who teaches French at Loveland High School in Loveland, CO, where she is also the district world languages curriculum supervisor, says, “Differentiated instruction doesn’t mean meeting the needs of *all* students; it means meeting the needs of each student. It is truly giving each learner access, equity, and support in the process of acquiring and using new knowledge.”

Theisen cites the work of Howard Gardner [see sidebar on p. 45] and Tomlinson in “Differentiated Instruction in the Foreign Language Classroom: Meeting the Diverse Needs of All Learners,” her article for *The Communiqué*, a publication of the Languages Other Than English Center for Educator Development. She finds Tomlinson’s models of differentiated learning to be helpful and applies them in her own classroom. Theisen also offers further examples for language learning, such as in a Spanish class where students read and create a graphic representation of an Aztec legend. Then, using flexible grouping, student teams choose one other Aztec or Mayan legend provided by the teacher, or one that they find on their own. In order to demonstrate their understanding, students can design a movie script, create a movie, or publish an online book.

Theisen gives the example of the German II class mentioned in this article’s introduction to explain learning centers.

Another example is built on readiness level. “A tiered lesson is when you organize students into groups based on the data of their growth in formative and summative assessments,” Theisen explains. “The concept is to take the key goals and learning of the thematic topics and build activities to support the key goals and learning at different levels, each taking students to the next level with respectful, challenging tasks for each level.”

She notes that in a tiered lesson, students who are struggling need a more concrete assignment, while students whose readiness levels are the highest need more abstract assignments. Students in the middle need a combination of the concrete and the abstract. “You can organize the same questions and the same goals, but although the tasks may be different for the students with lower readiness, they still must be respectable tasks,” she explains. “Don’t just give them a worksheet if the other students are making a movie. Instead, they could make a video of an advertisement or a digital poster using their vocabulary. It is about respectful tasks for all.

“We have to first find out about our students and their different interests, learning profiles, and readiness levels,” continues Theisen. “When we know this information, it is then so important to use it to inform instruction. Tomlinson talks about varying the content, the process, and finally the product. Students are empowered by choice. When teachers honor, respect, and act on varying ways students take in, process, and act on new knowledge, learning occurs. And learning occurs in a collaborative sense where students and teachers are in a partnership. Students feel a sense of safety and belonging in the learning environment. In this safe environment, critical thinking and creativity—essential 21st century skills—can flourish.”

Theisen says that when you give them choices, students will pleasantly surprise you with what they do. “I like to give them some examples,” she adds, “but not too many, because I don’t want to close their minds to any of the possibilities.”

She believes that teaching with the learner in the center makes differentiated instruction the natural way to organize instruction, and that differentiated instruction helps the teacher become more observant of the needs of each learner, thus making it more evident to adjust instruction as needed. “Don’t be afraid of collaborating with students,” she advises. “Of course, you have to have curriculum to follow, but teaching is not static; so as we say in my district: *Plan, do, check, and adjust.*”

Today’s technology provides many more options for teachers to use to differentiate learning for their students, but as Theisen points out, it also allows language educators to share ideas and strategies such as differentiated instruction with one another more easily. “We have so many ways to connect, such as through Facebook and Twitter, and also through state and national meetings,” she notes. “These all help us to develop a professional learning community.”

Differentiated Instruction at a German Immersion School

Located in Saint Paul, MN, the Twin Cities German Immersion School (TCGIS) is a public charter school with a full immersion program that utilizes German as the language of instruction beginning in kindergarten. It opened in 2005 with two grades and plans to expand each year until it becomes a K–8 program. From kindergarten through the eighth grade, students at TCGIS will receive inclusive

and sequential instruction in German language arts, mathematics, social studies, science, health/physical education, visual arts, and music. Daily English instruction begins in third grade, and in middle school the students are also introduced to Spanish.

TCGIS embraces the idea that all children learn best when they are known and understood as individuals, so one of its goals is that each child is accepted and challenged in the manner that is most appropriate for them. The classrooms at TCGIS are structured with a variety of differentiated learning centers, and a variety of methods are used in each subject area to provide opportunities for students of all learning styles to excel and succeed. Related projects based on individual interests encourage and develop independent student learning. The teaching methods also incorporate Gardner's Multiple Intelligences [see p. 45] by using a multi-sensory approach, which the school says sharpens global awareness while exposing children to other cultures and thoughts.

Sonja Cooper teaches first grade at TCGIS, and is ideally suited to teaching at the school, not only because she was born and raised in Germany, but also because her Master's degree in gifted and talented education strengthened her interest in differentiated instruction. Because she teaches first grade in a German immersion school where some students arrive with no previous experience with the language, while others have been learning it in gifted and talented programs in kindergarten, Cooper says, "I can't imagine not using differentiated instruction. If I didn't use small group instruction, I would lose those with no knowledge of German, and those with higher knowledge would tune me out. It benefits everybody, because you can foster growth for children at the high or low level."

One of Cooper's favorite strategies is using learning stations, and she uses them for almost all of the language block. "For me, learning stations have been 100% effective in teaching a foreign language," she says.

She explains, "This year, I had 24 students, so I had six stations with four students each. I'm fortunate to have an intern from Germany, so I knew to plan two lessons that needed the support of a teacher. It takes time at the beginning of the year, but once you know the levels, you're teaching the same thing. You just provide advanced instruction in the curriculum components for the more advanced students. You're teaching the same thing, but at a higher level. You can't plan 20 different lessons, so you just adjust for the different levels of students. It takes time and practice at first, but for me it's now so natural that I couldn't think about not doing it."

After finding it time-consuming and difficult to record the stories herself, she found out her school had iPods available and discovered a better way. Now she downloads podcasts of educational programs from Germany for her students—some more advanced and some less challenging. There are four iPods that can be used at a learning station, and Cooper says, "Each program lasts about 15 minutes, and the students choose which program. Every student loves that station!"

One of her favorite times of the school year is in January. "That to me is the most amazing time of year, because it is when even the new students aren't afraid to use the target language for phrases they have learned, such as asking to go to the bathroom." It's also the time when she and her students plan a theater piece, which last year was the German version of Cinderella. "Even the students who are new to the

language become part of it, even if it is a small speaking part." Cooper shares an anecdote that demonstrates the joy that can come from knowing and understanding your students and their different abilities. She knew one student had a diagnosis of attention-deficit, hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). She gave him a major role in the play, because she believed it fit his abilities and it meant that he wouldn't have to sit on the sidelines—something he would not be good at doing. He more than lived up to her expectations; he excelled in the part.

For Cooper, differentiated instruction means that she is fair to all 24 of her students and divides her time among all of them. "When I walk out at the end of the day, I feel like have taken care of all my students," she says. "It means providing the best instruction possible for that student at that time."

Developing Differentiated Instruction

In her book, *Differentiated Instruction: A Guide for Foreign Language Teachers*, Deborah Blaz says that in differentiated instruction, teachers must identify the differences both in students and in possible teaching strategies, and make adjustments according to what will most benefit students and facilitate learning. They will then develop and implement bit by bit the characteristics of a differentiated classroom.

According to Blaz, "The key word is *development*. Any good educational program is always under construction. Assessment, evaluation, and reflection are the keys to finding what works and what doesn't work, and trying to fix the latter." Blaz notes that students must learn to recognize their differences, their strengths and weaknesses, their learning styles, and their intelligences, and find the best way to express them. She calls differentiated instruction complex and flexible, with ways to accommodate different learning styles, interests, prior knowledge, socialization needs, and comfort zones. Elements of the differentiated classroom include choice, connections, learning how to learn, and multiple learning modes.

Blaz, who teaches French at Angola High School in Angola, IN, where she also serves as chair of the World Languages Department, believes differentiation is valuable because it engages students, takes into account their variations in readiness to learn, and uses their interests and differences to enhance learning. She adds, however, "A teacher must be fully engaged, know the students and their needs well, use the curriculum proficiently, and incorporate daily assessment. If this isn't something you're already doing, it is an adjustment!"

She sees what she calls some very common misconceptions about what differentiation is. "It's not *lots* of choices but rather only 2 or 3, and only one portion of a lesson (content, process, or product, or the learning environment) is differentiated, not all of them," she explains. "It's not as hard as you'd think, but people try to do too much and are overwhelmed."

Since the strategies and techniques that are most effective will vary according to the students, Blaz says that without assessment, attempting differentiated instruction will likely fail. "It's really not so much about strategies as it is about evaluation and reflection—student reflection being a valuable component," she notes. "Giving students 'respectful' work and using variety are important, too."

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What Students Say

"Your teaching methods are a perfect blend of meeting today's technologically savvy high schooler with methods that communicate the knowledge in ways that are immersive and engaging but at the same time do not do all the work for the learner. The musical methods used take advantage of the fact that today's high schoolers are very often listening to music. The visual methods are very effective as well. From the memorable and humorous videos shown in class to the story times that involved funny and animated gestures and props, the messages communicated visually were also very attention-grabbing. The attention that was held by these methods was the kind where learning happens."

"I've always loved singing, so the songs we do bring a lot to my learning/fun experience. I always end up singing the songs for weeks and months afterwards, so I get more than my fill of French. On top of that, all of the active movement and talk-times really get people out of their comfort zones, which helps so much in the learning process."

"I really liked how often we used technology, especially Twitter. It was like bringing the classroom home, or with me everywhere. It also really connected with me as a student, because social sites like Twitter and Facebook are things that I use all the time and find familiar."

"I think the use of plays really brought a lot of us out of our comfort zones and made us think together on a higher level in order to create something in a different language to the level you expected of us."

"Repetition really helped me remember certain vocabulary words, as well as inflection. Memorizing scripts that have specific grammar components has helped me remember how to form those particular sentences. I loved the songs and still listen to them constantly. Even now, I see how important the 5 Cs are and wish [my university] used them in their French curriculum—and every curriculum, for that matter."

"Every time that you invited a new 'friend' into the classroom I really enjoyed it. These were unique moments that, though we all knew what was coming, were still fun, interactive, enjoyable, and educational. They were true experiences that are hard to replicate in other settings, and really introduced new fluency to the language. Such events also created a necessity for higher-level listening and recognition of French. And the interactive Internet activities that I could do at home, or I could do in class, were really nice for me. It allowed me to realize all these cool things online that I could use for good school projects, and the creative release made it easier to transition into the new language."

Perhaps no one is better able to share the benefits of the differentiated classroom than the students themselves. Here are some of their comments.

From Patricia Almquist's French IV class at River Hill High School in Howard County, MD:

"The choice board activity allowed us to choose which type of project best suited each of our individual learning styles. I am very grateful for Mme. A. giving us this freedom of choice. In high school, oftentimes the curriculum is too packed to have the time to be creative, but I think it's just as important to have the choice to learn expressively."

"I enjoyed having a choice of what project to do. It allowed me to focus on things that I thought were interesting, and thus I did a better job and worked harder on my project because it was less of a chore. I also think the choices were diverse enough that it allowed for a variety of people to be successful."

"Choice boards are a great compromise between teachers and students. Teachers are still able to create boundaries for projects, yet students have the freedom to choose a project which they will enjoy doing."

From Toni Theisen's current and former French students in Loveland, CO:

"Incorporating a wide variety of learning activities is what kept me engaged and allowed for demonstrations of learning. While we still utilized textbooks, it was also the singing, videos, shopping exercises, literature, and other activities that helped me understand the context and applications for what I was learning."

More on Differentiated Instruction

For more information about differentiated instruction, here are some resources to explore.

Dare to Differentiate – wikispace created by Leslie Grahm
www.daretodifferentiate.wikispaces.com

Differentiated Instruction: A Guide for Foreign Language Teachers
 by Deborah Blaz

“Differentiated Instruction in the Foreign Language Classroom:
 Meeting the Diverse Needs of All Learners” by Toni Theisen
www.sedl.org/loteced/communique/n06.pdf

Differentiation Central
differentiationcentral.com

The Differentiated Classroom: Responding to the Needs of All Learners by Carol Ann Tomlinson, ASCD

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A District-Wide Adoption of Differentiated Instruction

“Gone are the days when language classes are made up of only advanced learners,” says Leslie Grahm. “Language learning is for all students. As a result, language educators face the challenge of meeting the needs of very diverse learners. Differentiated instruction is an approach for meeting those needs.”

For the last six years, Grahm has served as the world language resource teacher for the Howard County Public School System (MD) under the leadership of Coordinator Deborah Espitia. Before holding that position, she was a middle school and high school teacher of French and Spanish. According to Grahm and Espitia, they have adopted an approach of differentiated instruction in their district, where the languages taught include Chinese, French, German, Italian, Latin, Russian, and Spanish.

Differentiation is not just a set of strategies, but instead it can be best described as how a teacher chooses to respond to his/her students’ needs, say Espitia and Grahm. Teachers can differentiate content, process, products, assessments, and the classroom environment, taking into consideration students’ learning profiles, interests, and readiness levels. It is a student-centered approach—which necessitated a shift in thinking on the part of many of their teachers. The learning in the classroom, while guided by the curriculum, is no longer driven by the textbook, but rather by data collected by the teacher from the students. That data could be in the form of interest surveys, learning style and multiple intelligence surveys, formative assessments, daily assignments and performances, and summative assessments.

“We ask our teachers to consider every product and performance a student produces as a message to the teacher about his or her readiness level for and interest in a particular content topic,” says Grahm.

Grahm and Espitia note that they have based their journey with differentiation mostly on Tomlinson’s work, using what they describe as her “non-negotiables” of differentiated instruction as their foundation:

- Supportive learning environment
- Continuous assessment
- High-quality curriculum
- Respectful tasks
- Flexible grouping

They have found some of the most effective strategies to be choice boards, flexible grouping strategies and cooperative learning strategies, learning centers, RAFT assignments (identifying various roles, audiences, formats, and topics from which students choose), and tiered assignments.

“We have intentionally modeled differentiation through our own professional development and have offered opportunities for teachers to deepen their knowledge and practice around differentiated instruction by varying the delivery models, offering choices, and tailoring experiences for participants’ readiness levels, while continuing to have high expectations about and issuing challenges for the implementation of the philosophy,” explains Grahm. Moreover, she adds, “We encourage our teachers to be transparent with their students about how their lesson planning has been based on what they know about their students’ interests, learning preferences, and readiness levels.”

In Howard County, MD, the efforts made to implement the strategy of differentiated instruction in the public schools are providing district-wide benefits for the students.



Differentiation for Language Educators

At Carmel High School (CHS) in Carmel, IN, the mission statement notes, “By recognizing and allowing for individual differences and special needs, the school through its programs encourages and inspires students to think logically, creatively, and effectively for the benefit of themselves and society.” The languages offered at CHS include Chinese, French, German, Greek, Japanese, Latin, and Spanish.

Angelika Becker, who is a teacher as well as head of the World Language Department at CHS, says, “Students learn in different ways and at different rates, and they have different interests. In order to reach all students, we teachers have to differentiate our instruction, especially in the less commonly taught languages . . . We have multi-level classes, and differentiation is especially important when teaching such classes.”

At last year’s ACTFL Annual Convention and World Languages Expo in Boston, Becker was one of the presenters of a session titled, “Creating a Differentiated Classroom for the 21st Century Learner”—along with Wendy Burghbacher from Pittsburgh’s Shady Side Academy, and Gert Wilhelm with ZfA (the German Central Office for Schools in Foreign Countries).

Becker has found some of the most effective strategies to be RAFT assignments, assessment choices, and assignments in which students write their own content questions about readings. The students tell her that one of their favorite activities of the year is the one that features learning stations organized according to multiple intelligences. Another popular activity that she shared at the convention is circumlocution. She puts nine vocabulary words based on a certain activity on the overhead, and students define those in the target language with a partner, with one partner describing the word and the other guessing what it is. Becker constantly changes the words, and the students can choose to define the ones they know.

The popularity of the presentation they made in Boston, with more than 50 people attending, led Becker, Burghbacher, and Wilhelm to conclude that there is not only a great deal of interest in the topic,

but also a need for more material and more presentations on differentiation in the foreign language classroom.

Addressing the Challenges

Becker finds one of the main challenges for differentiating instruction to be organization. “When I plan differentiated lessons, I have to be extremely organized. I have to keep the different assignments and approaches separate while I teach a coherent class,” she says.

Cooper acknowledges that, “Differentiated instruction scares people because it seems like so much work.” However, she adds, “Once it is implemented, it actually saves time.”

Theisen adds, “Because we don’t have much time in language classes, we have to look at how we input the content in many ways in the target language and make it rich and meaningful.”

Time is the first challenge most teachers confront when presented with the idea of differentiated instruction, so making the most of the limited hours with students is an important concept. Theisen recognizes, however, that it does take time to initiate the practice, and some teachers will see it as overwhelming. She suggests, “Start small. Start at the product stage, for example, and give your students three choices that are aligned with the rubric. It’s an ongoing process, and you can build from there.”

Grahn says the implementation process in Howard County has been slow and mirrors the classroom in the sense that they have given challenging but achievable expectations to their teachers about their implementation of this approach. “This philosophy of ‘going slow to go fast’ emphasizes intentional acts of implementation of the ideas around differentiation, which should be complemented by student feedback and teacher reflection,” she explains.

“Another challenge has been that there are few resources on differentiation targeted for world language teachers. As a result, I created a wikispace where ideas can be shared and compiled. Through the implementation of this tool, we have also learned that differentiated activities can be easily adapted from other content areas. A third challenge has

Multiple Intelligences: A Theory Supporting Differentiation

When Howard Gardner published *Frames of Mind: The Theory of Multiple Intelligences* 25 years ago, he identified seven capacities that he called the multiple intelligences: linguistic, logical-mathematical, musical, spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, interpersonal, and intrapersonal. He has since added an eighth (naturalist) intelligence and speculates about a possible ninth (existential) intelligence.

Recently, a project by Mindy Kornhaber and her colleagues, Schools Using Multiple Intelligences Theory (SUMIT), looked at 42 schools that had been using MI theory for at least three years. According to the researchers, 78% of the schools reported positive standardized test outcomes, and 5/8 of these attributed the improvement to practices inspired by MI theory; 78% reported improved performances by students with learning difficulties; and 80% reported improvement in parent participation, with 3/4 of these attributing the increase to MI theory. Finally, 81% of the schools reported improvement in student discipline, and 2/3 of these attributed the improvement to MI theory.

While Gardner stresses that teachers are the educational experts, and his views should be taken as advisory only, he does offer two components that he believes should be part of MI application: (1) an attempt to individualize education as much as possible, and (2) a commitment to convey important ideas and concepts in a number of different formats.

Pat Burke Guild and Stephen Garger cite the work of Gardner and others in their book, *Marching to Different Drummers*, in which they focus on the different ways people learn and describe cognitive style, multiple intelligences, teaching style, leadership style, and psychological type. The first edition of their book was published in 1985 and is often acknowledged as one of the earliest sources that consolidated research and theories about different learning and teaching styles in the classroom. In it, the authors argue for more accommodation of differences in education. Differentiated instruction is built not just on solid research, but on the commonsense idea that one size does not fit all in the classroom.

Don't Miss ACTFL Webinar on Differentiation

Want to learn more about differentiation in the language classroom? Be sure to participate in the ACTFL Professional Webinar on **September 21, 2011**, entitled "Differentiating to Support Each Learner," and led by Paula Patrick. Learn more on p. 28 of this issue or on the ACTFL website (www.actfl.org).

been helping our teachers understand that differentiation is not the 'flavor of the month' for us. It is a philosophy which we have wholeheartedly adopted as a program, and therefore, is not going away. It is not a temporary initiative, but something that defines our work."

Worth the Effort

Becker has seen the benefit of differentiation in reaching more students. "By differentiating, I allow the students to show me what they can do versus what they can't. I let them choose the end product that I will evaluate, and they can shine," she explains. "In a multi-level class, I can teach one lesson, but the student's assignment or my assessment differs."

According to Grahn, teachers who have implemented differentiated instruction in their classrooms with fidelity report higher levels of student engagement. Students love having choices and being offered classroom activities in multiple modalities, and appreciate the custom-

ization and personalization of learning. Flexible grouping strategies allow for collaboration among students, and activities provided in multiple modalities allow for hands-on, experiential learning.

Blaz sees great benefits in using differentiated instruction. "Student engagement is a powerful tool," she says, "and students are more responsive and successful in a differentiated classroom. This means fewer discipline and acting-out problems, too."

Theisen believes that when using these approaches to learning, teachers provide a fair chance for each student to learn, create, and grow. "What we're looking for is not equality but equity," she says. "When we can offer learners choices and give them authentic ways to interact with content in collaborative, supportive ways, they feel successful. And when they feel successful, they begin the path of becoming self-directed, flexible learners and leaders. These are 21st century skills. Differentiated instruction is turning the power and the passion of learning over to the student."

Adlai Stevenson once said, "Difference is the nature of life; it is part of our moral universe. Without difference, life would become lifeless." Language educators who are successfully implementing differentiated instruction are finding their classrooms to be very lively places indeed; and in these lively classrooms, students may find excitement about their choices and excitement about learning.

Susan Reese is a contributing writer to The Language Educator. She has written for numerous education publications and is based in Arlington, Virginia.

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